

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

For the week of February 2, 1998

This week, Kevin delves into the wonderful world of Internet FAQs -- Frequently Asked Questions and answers lists. In these documents you can find answers on every topic from Jewish culture to body piercing. Read on to learn where to find FAQs.

=*=*= FAQtoids =*=*=

The Internet seems like magic. If you're looking for information on how to cook for a low-sodium diet, or if you can't remember the lyrics to "The Rainbow Connection," or you want to know why your PC won't print, you can find the answer on the Internet. The Internet is the ultimate give-and-take community. If you need information, you can have it. If you have some, you are invited to share it.

A staple of Internet resources is the FAQ, or frequently asked questions list. Thousands of individuals around the world spend their free time creating these documents, so you can quickly find that recipe, that lyric, that answer.

The origin of the FAQ document is rooted in Usenet newsgroups. The basic purpose of a FAQ is to answer the most common questions asked by newcomers to a newsgroup. As you might expect, with so many people coming and going on Usenet, certain basic questions come up again and again. If you're a regular reader of a newsgroup -- whether its topic is Frank Zappa or midwifery -- it can be rather frustrating to see the same questions posted by newbies over and over again. FAQs are a simple solution: someone in the know volunteers to maintain a list of answers to those common questions and post it to the newsgroup every so often. Now, newbies can quickly find answers to their questions, and regulars will see fewer iterations of "Who is Frank Zappa?" or "What is midwifery?" and other questions.

Whenever I read a newsgroup for the first time, I make it a point to look for its FAQ. If I have a specific question in mind, it might be answered in the FAQ. (If it isn't, I can post my query with confidence, knowing that the teeming masses won't send me nasty e-mails for asking a question that's answered in the FAQ file.) FAQs can be fun to browse, especially if you're the type of person who likes to thumb randomly through the encyclopedia. You can learn some interesting stuff by browsing the FAQ archives.

Here are the titles of a dozen FAQs among the thousands available. This just skims the surface of the breadth of FAQ topics.

- Apple // & CD-ROM FAQ
- Big Folks Health FAQ
- rec.pyrotechnics FAQ
- Textile related books FAQ
- Epilepsy FAQ
- comp.apps.spreadsheets FAQ
- rec.skydiving FAQ
- soc.culture.jewish FAQ
- rec.arts.bodyart Piercing FAQ
- Sudden infant death syndrome FAQ
- Java Programmers FAQ
- Conventional fusion FAQ

FAQs were around long before the Web was a household word -- but unlike some other Internet resources, FAQs have not dwindled away since the Web has become popular. In fact, the number of FAQs is higher than ever. Many are available on the Web as well as Usenet, making it easier to find the information that you need.

You can find FAQs in a variety of places on the Internet. If a FAQ is associated with a newsgroup, you'll find it posted to that newsgroup, usually once or twice a month.. (How often is completely up to the person who maintains the FAQ.) Most FAQs are cross-posted to the newsgroup news.answers. That's a newsgroup that contains nothing but FAQs. You can browse its contents to see what's been posted recently.

The easiest way to search for a FAQ on a particular topic is to use a Web FAQ archive, such as the one at MIT (<http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/hypertext/faq/usenet/FAQ-List.html>). A site like this one is beneficial for several reasons: first, it contains an archive of all FAQs. On news.answers, you'll only find FAQs that have been posted in the last few days. Also, the web site is alphabetically indexed and searchable, which assists finding a particular file quickly.

There are more than 3,000 FAQ documents available in these archives. Many of them are very long -- spanning multiple parts, providing detailed answers to dozens of questions. Others are shorter, simply providing the "rules of the road" for a particular newsgroup.

=*=*= SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*=*=

The news.answers newsgroup: news:news.answers

MIT's Usenet FAQ archive: <http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/hypertext/faq/usenet/FAQ-List.html>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future newsletter issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

You take the good, you take the bad, you take them both, and there you have...
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